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The Three Transitions of a Dual-Career Couple

As Cheryl lay in her hospital bed beside her newborn baby, she couldn't have been happier. She had saved enough to take a three-month unpaid maternity leave from her job in a financial services firm and was relishing the thought of spending long days learning to be a mom to little Annabel. It meant a lot to her. Throughout her childhood, Cheryl had often had to worry about money, and as a young adult, she had worked hard to make sure that her own children would not have to. Her dream was coming true, and she was proud of it. She was a bit nervous, too, about the bigger apartment that she and Mark had bought—they had stretched their budget to make it possible—but she was grateful that Mark's salary would help cover their expenses while she was on leave.

Cheryl was suddenly distracted from her reverie when Mark bounded into the room, his face beaming, bearing the bag of

baby clothes they had forgotten in their dash to the hospital. For the past two years, he had put up with a corporate job he hated while networking like mad to move into the startup world. The move had proved elusive, but the birth of Annabel had clearly improved his mood.

Mark kissed Cheryl and picked Annabel up, staring into her eyes as she yawned. "I told you they would be just like yours," he said, then blurted out, "Guess what?" He seemed giddy with excitement.

"What?" replied Cheryl expectantly.

"I just got a call from Sebastien. He secured the first round of funding for his startup, and wants me to join it!"

The blood drained from Cheryl's face. This was exactly the kind of move that Mark had dreamed of, but joining an early-stage startup would mean a huge drop in salary—maybe no salary at all. Their scanty savings and their new mortgage meant that Cheryl would have to go back to work after just a few weeks. Trying to be supportive, she said, "That's so great! Let's talk about the timing once we get home."

"We can't, darling, I'm sorry, Sebastien is moving fast and the time is now," Mark answered, squeezing Cheryl's hand. "I've already resigned. I start there on Monday!"

Cheryl and Mark are real people; I have only changed their names. They are one of many couples I spoke to in researching this book. Their story—which we'll come back to in chapter 2—highlights a common theme I heard: so often, for dual-career couples, carefully plotted plans are upended by unexpected events, and the happiest moments in life overlap with sudden changes and challenges. The greatest opportunities spark the toughest, and most revealing, conversations. The most meaningful personal decisions seem to coincide with the most consequential professional opportunities.

While the challenges dual-career couples face are fairly well known, there is a surprising lack of meaningful guidance available on how to deal with them. Most career advice is targeted at individuals, treating major career decisions as if we're flying solo—without partners, children, siblings, friends, or aging parents to consider.

Moreover, most advice for couples focuses on their personal relationship, not the way it intersects with professional dreams. Even then, couples are bombarded with blanket prescriptions on what they should do: "Divide the housework equally," "Strike a balance between life and career," "Make time for one another"—none of which have helped couples become clearer about, let alone learn how to satisfy, their deepest needs in work and in love. Some even label those who strive for fulfillment in both work and love as hopelessly naive.

I believe most current advice has failed couples because it targets surface-level, practical issues, rather than the underlying forces that create those issues. It tells us how we should prioritize our careers, divide housework, and maintain a healthy relationship, rather than exploring why we are struggling with these things in the first place.

Many of the people I spoke to had devised intricate ways to synch their calendars, divide up household responsibilities, and balance their careers. Yet they rarely had a conversation about deeper psychological and social forces, by which I mean their struggles for power and control, the roles they expected each other to play in their shared lives, their personal hopes and fears, and the collective expectations of what defines a good relationship and career that exert a powerful influence on them.

While couples may not talk much about them, these deeper psychological and social forces influence the way they relate and decisions they make. They push and pull on people's behavior and on the shape of their relationship. At times, such as during

the transitions this book focuses on, these forces can seem overwhelming and inescapable; at others, they are just a gentle stream that carries couples along. People can be very aware of some of these forces, but others remain implicit or even unconscious. Through my research, I found that if couples don't address them, those forces can hold them back and lead them down a path of conflict. If couples understand and work with them, however, they can ease their practical challenges and help them thrive.

Beyond Dividing the Chores

My aim in writing this book is to move beyond the practicalities and provide a greater understanding of the psychological and social forces underlying the challenges that dual-career couples face. I also show how thinking and talking about these forces can help couples be more successful and fulfilled in love and work.

Five years ago, I set out to lift the lid on the lives of dual-career couples, to understand not just when and why couples struggle, but also when and why couples thrive. And to develop, based on this understanding, a more nuanced approach to guiding couples on how to make their lives work for them.

I started my research with a simple question: *How can dual-career couples thrive in their love and work?* At the beginning of my inquiry, I naively assumed that couples struggled early in their relationships, then at some point figured out how to fit their love and work together in a way that let them travel through their lives more or less smoothly. The further I got into the research, the more clouded the picture became. There were struggles throughout couples' working lives, which meant that they had to revisit how their relationship and careers fit together more than once.

As I interviewed more couples, the fog began to lift. I noticed similarities between their struggles. Moreover, I saw that these

struggles were predictable across a couple's life together. I discovered that dual-career couples faced three transitions during their working lives. Each required couples to face different challenges, and each, if well navigated, renewed their relationship and took it to a deeper level.

Mapping out these transitions helped me to understand the challenges that dual-career couples face in a new way. It revealed the psychological and social forces that drove the challenges—life events, conformity pressures, role changes. It also taught me how thinking and talking about these forces can help couples thrive in love and work, avoiding regrets, imbalance, and slowly drifting apart.

The result is this book: a portrait of what dual-career couples' lives are *really* like—and a guide to making them better.

The Rise of Dual-Career Couples

Before we dig in, it is important to recognize that being in a dual-career couple relationship is now the norm. In more than 65 percent of couples in North America and Europe, both partners work, a number that grows each year.[1] Even in countries like Japan, where the proportion of dual-career couples is lower, the trend is consistently upward.[2]

One obvious reason for this trend is economics. In today's expensive and uncertain world, having two salaries helps couples cope with the ever-increasing cost of living and provides a financial safety net should one partner be laid off.

But economic necessity is only part of the picture. Across the globe, couples are becoming more egalitarian. Men and women increasingly define a meaningful life as having a good career *and* having active roles at home. And although it is less often talked about, there is mounting evidence that couples reap benefits when both partners work *and* dedicate themselves to home life.

When one partner has a stable income, the other has more freedom to retrain, explore alternative paths, and make career changes. Taking the plunge to become an entrepreneur, for example, is much more palatable when you know your partner's salary will cover the bills. Research also shows that when both partners work, they have a greater respect for each other's careers, which leads them to feel closer emotionally.[3]

At home, when both partners are active, their children and their relationship benefit. Kids have better social skills and higher academic results when both their parents play with them and help out with homework and when the family eats together.[4] Couples have less conflict, more satisfying relationships, and more sex when both partners contribute substantially to household chores.[5] Perhaps most striking of all, couples in which partners earn roughly the same amount and share the housework equally have a staggering 48 percent lower chance of divorce than the average couple.[6]

Despite this array of benefits, life is not a bed of roses for dual-career couples. Logistics, which are perhaps more straightforward when one partner earns the bread and the other takes care of the home, can be a minefield. Many couples I spoke to shared horror stories of business-travel disasters or sick children on the day when both had critical meetings. Managing life is made even more challenging for those couples who live away from extended families. With smaller social support networks, some couples are under pressure to manage complex personal and family lives alone.

On top of this, careers are more mobile for everyone, in couples or not. Average workers will transition between ten and fifteen organizations over their working life.[7] Organizations no longer guarantee lifetime employment, and people actively move around to pursue growth and opportunities. There are many upsides to having more career choices, but there is no doubt that making these decisions is stressful and can be more so when you're coordinating your choices with those of your beloved.

Even as people place less emphasis on organizational belonging, they place more emphasis on their careers as a source of meaning in their lives. Now more than ever, what we do is intricately connected to who we are and how we define ourselves.[8] With identity, self-esteem, and sense of meaning all wrapped up in our careers, it is no wonder that we are heavily invested in making them successful. In short, we work a lot.

The above trends present dual-career couples with a host of struggles, dilemmas, and questions: Can we both have equally important careers, or must we prioritize one over the other? How can we juggle children and family commitments without sacrificing our work? Does everything require trade-offs, or can we find solutions that benefit us both? And most fundamentally: *How can we thrive in love and in work?*

These questions are not just a matter of academic interest to me. They are questions I have personally lived through and wrestled with for the past fourteen years.

Researching Two-Career Couples While Being Half of One

I decided to quit my career at 3 a.m. one March morning in 2010. I was in the midst of a transition from the corporate to the academic world and, at thirty-three, one of the oldest students on my PhD program. I was also the mother of two wonderful, lively, and extremely wakeful children under two.

Like many new parents, my husband Gianpiero and I were on a roller coaster. We adored the two little creatures we had brought into this world; they gave us a sense of deep meaning and a daily dose of surprises. To us, they were gorgeous in every way; yet the energy and time we needed and wanted to pour into them was often overwhelming. We were on our nineteenth month of

interrupted sleep, and the pattern of three or four nightly get-ups showed no sign of abating. We were beyond exhaustion.

As I looked to the coming years, I could not see how we could make it work. We were both ambitious and we had faith in each other's talent, but academia is a demanding, high-pressure, up-or-out system. It's a grind. If Gianpiero did not keep excelling in his teaching and writing, he would lose his job in the business school in which he worked. Likewise, if I did not produce novel, publishable research, I would never find a job. Although we were driven, neither of us was willing to give up too much time with our children or each other. Something had to give.

My friends and parents (who were a dual-career couple themselves) all encouraged me to take time out. Initially, I resisted. I knew that if I stopped for more than a few months, my door to academia would likely close, and I wanted a shot at my dream. I searched for books, advice—anything that could show me a way—but all I found were prescriptions of how to split housework or tales of couples who had somehow found a perfect balance. Gianpiero did a good chunk of the shopping, cooking, and cleaning, but balance eluded us. When 3 a.m. that March morning rolled in, I had had enough. I waited for our breakfast of thick black coffee and warm milk to announce my intentions. I expected his relief and half-hearted resistance. What I got was different.

"That's your sleep deprivation talking," Gianpiero told me. "There is no way I am letting you give your dream up, not now." I sat in stunned silence as he told me that I was about to make a huge mistake that I would bitterly regret, and that he would not stand by and watch me do it. He reminded me that he had been the first person to whom I had confided my wish to do a PhD, and how much it meant to me. He reminded me that this was not the first time I had hesitated since starting, and it would not be the last. I was annoyed. He could tell. I had been looking for tea and sympathy; what I got was a loving kick. Yet he was right. If

he had not pushed me to step up and plow through that painful period, there is no way my career would be where it is today. I may not have even had a career.

Gianpiero's loving challenge saved me—or maybe, more precisely, shaped me. He continues to affect who I am not only as a wife and mother, but also as a professional. And I shape him in turn. Hard as it was to take back then, his challenge was not unfamiliar. I had done the very same to him, over another breakfast, a few years before. We were in Sicily, visiting his hometown, and even the excitement of our still-new love could not quench his professional restlessness. He was freelancing as a consultant and instructor, but longed for a full-time teaching job. He had been looking for two years without success, and each rejected application hurt.

That morning, he told me in passing as we ate the local breakfast of almond-flavored granita, he had deleted an email from the department chair of a European business school he would have loved to work at. They had invited him for interviews twice already, but each time, no offer had followed. Now, she had written, there was an opening for an instructor, but only on a temporary basis. He had had enough of gigs and of rejections, he said, and could not take one more.

"You're crazy not to accept. They won't be able to let go of you, once they have you around," I said, knowing something about it.

"You're in love," he replied, "they're in business."

I did not know then that I would end up writing a book about how blurry that line is for dual-career couples, but I could not help replying, "I'm in both." Then I pulled out his laptop, went into his trash email folder, and wrote a one-line reply to his future department chair (and later mine). "When do I start?" He has worked there for thirteen years.

As I put the finishing touches on this book, I know that right now, things are good. I also know that, just as in March 2010, or December 2004, everything in life is a phase. We have faced, and

are certain to continue to face, many challenges in our life together. At times, we work through them well; at others, less so. Each time we face a hurdle, I have searched for meaningful advice and mostly come away empty-handed. We, and many of our friends, colleagues, and students, have muddled through our dual-career challenges, not always successfully. Living through my own experiences, and witnessing those of so many others, I have often thought, "There must be a way. There must be a way of approaching this life we have chosen that can help more couples thrive."

Observing Early Patterns

I've spoken to over a hundred couples in the course of my research. Although each couple's story was unique in its details, they experienced similar patterns of highs and lows. All struggled through similar challenges, which they faced at similar periods in their lives and relationships. When I began to see how these patterns cut across couples, and when I realized that the periods of upheaval aligned with career stage and the length of their relationships, I began to think of couples in terms of their life cycles.

It struck me that while psychologists had mapped adults' life cycles, the same had not been done for couples. Neither had anyone mapped how these life stages related to careers, and how people's movement through each stage influences their partner's.

The notion that life is a journey in distinct stages is old. It appears in ancient scriptures, in Shakespeare's plays, and in the work of other great writers. In more recent times, the work of psychologists Erik Erikson and Daniel Levinson has led to a deep understanding of adults' life stages and in particular of the transitions between them. In these transitions, Erikson argued, we must resolve developmental issues distinct to each stage.[9] These "crises of development" as Levinson called them, are not only

necessary but desirable.[10] It is the developmental crises we face in our transitions that hold the potential for growth, and without them our development stalls.

The deeper I got into my data, the more clearly I saw parallels between the individual developmental transitions that Erikson and Levinson described and those of the couples I studied. I also saw key differences: distinct *couple* transitions and challenges that needed to be addressed for both partners to thrive in the next stage of their relationship, career, and lives.

The Three Transitions

I found that dual-career couples pass through three distinct transitions on their route from becoming a couple to retirement. Each transition plunges a couple into a landscape of new questions, different concerns, and novel ways of relating. And each requires couples to tackle specific psychological and social forces that underpin their relationship. While the transitions push couples to tackle a deeper layer of their relationship and lives, they involve revisiting the agreements forged during previous transitions.

The first transition requires couples to move from having parallel, independent careers and lives to having interdependent ones. The work of this transition is a deliberate accommodation to the first major life event—often a big career opportunity or the arrival of a child—that couples face together. To navigate their first transition, couples must negotiate how to prioritize their careers and divide family commitments in a way that lets them both thrive with few regrets. In doing so, they craft a joint path along which they travel until their second transition.

The work of the second transition is *reciprocal individuation*. Don't be put off by the term. It means that couples must shift their focus from conforming to others' demands and expectations and figure

out what they each really want out of their careers, lives, and relationship. This transition is usually sparked by feelings of restlessness and oppression that give way to existential questions of direction and purpose. It requires couples to figure out their unique interests and desires, and renegotiate the roles they play in each other's lives. In doing this work on deeper levels of their relationship, couples also renegotiate the division of career and family labor that they established in their first transition. If completed successfully, the result of this transition is a broader path along which couples travel until they reach their third transition.

Couples' work in the third transition is to reinvent themselves in a way that is grounded in their past accomplishments, while opening possibilities for the future. This transition is triggered by role shifts—becoming the most experienced workers, the empty-nester parents, and being seen as the older generation—that result in identity voids. Those voids come with feelings of loss that must be tended to, but they also make space for new opportunities. Couples can sink into these voids and drift, or they can use them as a place of exploration and reinvention. To do the latter, couples must tackle any unresolved developmental tasks of the first two journeys, then play with the idea of who they might become given their new ambitions and priorities. In doing so, couples craft a path along which they can travel with renewed purpose.

The three transitions are linked. In the first transition, while making deliberate accommodations to a major life event, couples implicitly negotiate the roles they will take in each other's lives. Over time, these roles become constraining and spark the restlessness and questioning that lead to the second transition. The second transition is thus in part about tackling the side effects of the first one. Likewise, the third transition cannot be completed unless couples address regrets and developmental asymmetries left over from their first two transitions.

Some people will face the three transitions with the same partner, while others will move through different transitions with different partners. Despite these variations, all of which I will explore in the book, the three transitions follow a similar pattern.

The Pattern of Transitions

Each transition begins with a trigger that makes it difficult for couples to continue traveling along the path they crafted in their previous stage—be that the independent paths that partners travel on before their first transition, the joint path that couples design in their first transition and travel until their second, or the broadened joint path that couples structure during their second transition and travel until their third.

The triggers for the first transition are major life events that originate from people's careers or personal lives, such as the need to move geographically, a promotion or a layoff, the arrival of a new baby, the need to care for aging parents, or family health issues. The triggers for the second transition originate from our inner worlds and present themselves as existential questions and doubts about whose life we are really living. The third-transition triggers come in the form of role shifts that create identity voids and open up the questions of what to do with the time and energy we have left.

Although the triggers are important, they don't define each transition. The triggers only reveal a transition's defining question. Answering this question becomes the couple's task for each transition. The pattern my research uncovered suggests that the three questions most couples will wrestle with during their transitions are:

- First transition: *How can we make this work?*
- Second transition: *What do we really want?*
- Third transition: *Who are we now?*

These defining questions go to the core of how couples live their lives and how they structure a path to allow both partners to thrive. When couples encounter the defining question of their transition, they are thrown off balance and doubts abound. This destabilization, while unsettling, is actually helpful. It creates the motivation for couples to revisit and recraft their path.

The central experience of all transitions is a period of struggle, when couples are suspended between old and new. They sense that the path they previously traveled on no longer works for them, but are not yet clear how to recraft it. Each transition has a set of traps, unique to its struggle, in which couples can get stuck. Some couples cannot escape these traps, and they end their journey together. Others find direction and figure out how to reshape their path in order to move forward.

After each transition in which they work on their path, couples enter a more stable period in which they travel along it. During these periods, couples relax and enjoy some breathing space. The deeper psychological and social forces that felt all-powerful during their transition recede to being gentle influencers. They build happy memory banks full of special family times, romantic moments, career growth, and activities with friends. Or they just go through familiar routines, enjoying their quiet familiarity. Eventually, they face new triggers and embark on their next transition—and the cycle repeats.

Life Is a Series of Transitions

Although my research revealed that these transitions are predictable, they often come as a surprise to couples. That's what happened to David and Melissa.

They'd just completed a five-hour drive to their Florida home from Emory University in Atlanta, where they had dropped off their

youngest child at college. As they settled with a sigh into their usual seats in the kitchen and poured a couple of glasses of their favorite wine, they reflected on the journey that had brought them here.

Thirty years ago, they'd been the ones graduating from college—David, a business major embarking on a promising career at a large accounting firm; Melissa, a psychology major taking her first steps into the world of public relations. They'd married, bought a home in Boston close to their parents, and begun planning a family of their own.

Two lively daughters arrived just eighteen months apart, and life suddenly got complicated: they abruptly found themselves in the first transition, battling sleepless nights while struggling to master increasingly interesting—and difficult—assignments at work. Just as they began to find a rhythm, David was offered a promotion to head a team in Florida.

Their careers had always been on equal footing, but if they moved to Florida, David's would unquestionably take priority. Juggling careers and family had been hard even with parental support nearby; how would they manage over eleven hundred miles away? And what would happen to Melissa's career?

Weeks of agonizing ended with the decision to move south. David's firm helped Melissa find a new job, and his new higher salary helped pay for child care. Their toddlers grew into girls. Weekends exploring Florida beaches, holidays with family, blossoming careers—it was a golden age until the next impasse hit, twelve years later.

Their second transition began in their early forties. David had become disillusioned with corporate life and begun to question whether accounting was still for him. Melissa was longing to strike out on her own. She dreamed of launching her own communications advice agency. But could they afford to explore new options? With two teenagers, a mortgage, and college fees on the horizon, a lot was at stake.

The uncertainty of this phase took a heavy toll on their relationship. Neither David nor Melissa felt that the other truly understood or appreciated their desire for change, and their career dissatisfaction spilled over into their marriage. Petty disagreements fueled growing resentments, and thoughts of divorce crossed their minds more than once. But six years later, they seemed to be back on track. They had supported each other's move to new roles. David had moved into a management position at a smaller accounting firm, where he was enjoying more independence. Melissa had taken the plunge into independent work and, after initially struggling to attract clients, was now thriving. Their girls were happy and excited about college life. David and Melissa felt they'd cracked the dual-career code and become strong role models for their daughters.

So why did they suddenly feel so unsettled? The two sat for a while without speaking, savoring the wine and noticing the unaccustomed quiet in their now-empty house. The little time they had spent just with each other over the past decade was apparent. They were a little awkward, like long-lost friends who, upon being reunited, wonder how much the other has changed. Finally, David broke the silence. He turned to Melissa and admitted, "Honey, I'm just not sure who we are anymore."

Suddenly, after all that they had been through together, they found themselves in a new transition: the third transition.

Many couples I spoke to during the course of my research were surprised by their need to go through successive transitions. Melissa and David had successfully navigated their first two, only to be shocked by the realization that they were now embarking on a third, with an outcome that they could scarcely anticipate. While these transitions can feel arduous, they are also reinvigorating if approached in the right way. They represent a developmental